

Briefly Noted

Random ideas about public administration, leadership and management to consider from Andrew Graham

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Resilience is in, but what is it?

The term resilience seems to be everywhere these days. Resilience is a good thing, right? Arising from the work of Karl Weick and others in the last century, this sensible notion is now in the realm of policy and managerial cliché. When it becomes clear that no ready solutions exist in terms of planning for possible issues or facing an array of unknown unknowns, the call for resilience arises.

If resilience is increasingly becoming a strategic competency for organizations, what does that competency look like exactly? Too often resilience is witnessed in a rear view mirror, after the fact. In truth the only test of certainty that an organization is resilient is if it proved itself so during a crisis. However, that does not really help an organization to become resilient capable.

Some recent research has started to look at this issue and come up with some interesting, but pretty practical observations about what makes an organization resilient. In several studies, there is a very clear link of basic sound management to resilience. A 2013 study from New Zealand found that “To be resilient, organizations rely on strong leadership, an awareness and understanding of their operating environment, their ability to manage vulnerabilities, and their ability to adapt in response to rapid change.”¹

Let’s see if we can produce a check-list of things to look for in the organization, its leaders, its culture and its people that might suggest that it could respond, react, learn and adapt from disruptions that we do not anticipate, that are more severe than foreseen, that severely test or break major systems and push everyone beyond the limit. That is a pretty good definition of the new normal of disruption, both natural and human, these days.

Key Questions to Assess Organizational Resilience Capacity

1. Is the organization already adapting and learning? Does it have early warning systems that capture both errors and anomalous low-noise events (sometimes called near misses)?

¹ Lee, Amy, Vargo, John & Seville, *Developing a Tool to Measure and Compare Organizations’ Resilience*, New Hazards Review, Vol 14, No. 1, February, 2013

2. Is there a high turnover of key staff or does the organization nurture organizational knowledge in its staff as a retention tool?
3. Does the organization manage the transition of key staff holding key knowledge so that know-how memory is passed on?
4. Is the organization highly competitive and aware of its business environment and ready to adapt as it changes?
5. Does the organization build capacity in staff to respond to changing circumstances? To identify new means of making things work?
6. Do the operations and strategic sides find ways to examine such events, determine their importance, respond and adapt as a normal thing to do, as a helpful thing to do and without seeking out a scapegoat?
7. Does the organization adjust its definition of resilience to be more than emergency planning?
8. Is there a robust risk management culture, not just a paper system?
9. Is there a holistic approach to identifying weaknesses and responding to them that engages the whole organization, not just response planners or auditors?
10. Does the organization have a good idea of the vulnerabilities in its supply chain? Is it doing something about them?
11. Can the organization readily secure emergency assistance from its supply chain, from its funders and from other infrastructure providers?
12. Is there redundancy of key capacities, supplies and systems?
13. Can one part of the organization's infrastructure shut down and another part take up the slack?
14. Are there cash reserves to deal with the unexpected?
15. Are there supply and equipment reserves?
16. Is the organization maintaining its infrastructure, human capacity and system so they are healthy, up-to-and working?
17. Are systems being tested regularly? This is not just power or mechanics. Are response scenarios being put to leaders to react to and see if they way they make decisions is the best one?
18. Is there requisite variety in how the organization gathers information to get varying opinions and listen to those it does not really enjoy listening to?
19. Is the organization engaged outside its boundaries to learn from others in its field, in companion fields, within the professions that make up its skill set?
20. Does the organization know where its people are, how to contact them, where their families are?